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Emotions in Action

A Co-Created Toolkit for Youth Workers

Based on the Erasmus+ Training Course

YOUTH Work Matters – Emotional Intelligence & Wellbeing in Youth Work



Partner organisations: Romania · Poland · Spain · Italy · Lithuania



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Introduction

About This Toolkit

This toolkit is a living document. It was not written in advance, planned in a meeting room, or assembled from existing resources. It was built during a training course — session by session, reflection by reflection — by a group of youth workers from five European countries who came together with one shared question: how do we work with emotions responsibly?

Emotions in Action is the practical outcome of the Erasmus+ training course **YOUth Work Matters – Emotional Intelligence & Wellbeing in Youth Work**, held in Baile Govora, Romania, in May 2026. The course brought together youth workers and youth leaders from Romania, Poland, Spain, Italy and Lithuania for eight days of intensive, experiential learning focused on emotional intelligence, self-regulation, and the systemic emotional dynamics of youth work.

This toolkit gathers the activities that were facilitated during that week — some by the lead trainer, some by participant teams representing their partner organisations. Every activity was tested in a real group context. Every reflection question was shaped by real responses. The facilitation notes reflect what actually happened in the room.

The Co-Creation Process

One of the defining commitments of **YOUth Work Matters** was that participants would not only be learners. They would also be contributors. Each partner organisation prepared and delivered at least one activity during the training, rooted in their own national youth work tradition and shaped by the themes of the week. This meant that by Day 4, the toolkit had already begun to write itself.

The result is a document with multiple voices, multiple methodological traditions, and a genuinely shared authorship. When you use an activity from this toolkit, you are not just using a method. You are entering a learning process that was co-created by youth workers who were themselves in the middle of it.

"This training is not about becoming perfect. It is about understanding how emotions function and how we respond to them professionally."

— Opening words of the **YOUth Work Matters** training course

How This Toolkit Is Organised

The activities are organised into three thematic chapters, following the pedagogical arc of the training itself:

Chapter 1	AWARENESS — Understanding emotions, invisible emotional struggles, and the patterns we carry into youth work.
Chapter 2	REGULATION — Embodied methods, grounding techniques, and experiential approaches to emotional self-regulation.
Chapter 3	POWER & RELATIONAL DYNAMICS — Leadership models, group climate, roles under stress, and collective storytelling.

How to Use This Toolkit

These activities are not a curriculum. They are a repertoire. You do not need to use them in order, and you do not need to use all of them. What you do need is to read the facilitation notes carefully before you use any activity — especially the emotional safety considerations.

- Read the emotional safety section of each activity before facilitating. This is not optional.
- Regulation before content. If your group is dysregulated, start with a grounding activity.
- Debrief is not decoration. The reflection questions are where the learning happens. Give them real time.
- Adapt, do not copy. Every group is different. The step-by-step guides are starting points, not scripts.
- You are the first tool. Your emotional regulation as a facilitator shapes what becomes possible in the room.

This toolkit deals with emotionally significant material. The activities explore hidden emotional struggles, body awareness, power dynamics, and group communication patterns. None of these are therapy techniques. They are all grounded in non-formal education methodology and have been tested in a professional Erasmus+ context.

However, emotionally intelligent facilitation requires that you know your group, monitor the room, and are prepared to pause, adjust, or close an activity early if the emotional temperature rises beyond what is productive. Participants always have the right to pass.

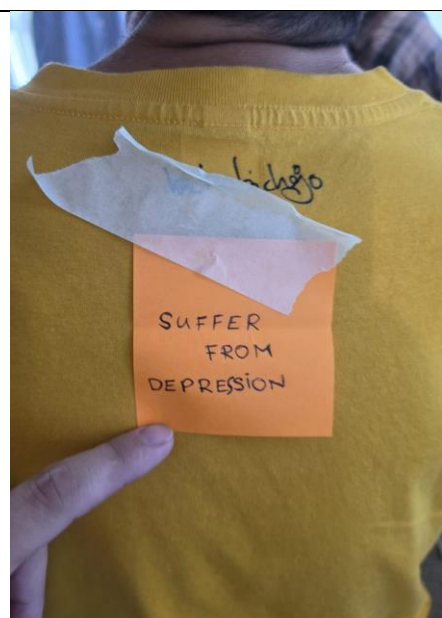
CHAPTER 1 — AWARENESS

Understanding emotions and invisible struggles

Before we can regulate emotion, we must be able to see it — in ourselves and in the people we work with. The activities in this chapter create the conditions for that visibility. They are not diagnostic. They are not therapeutic. They are experiential invitations to notice what is usually moving in the background: the emotional weather we carry into rooms, the invisible struggles young people hide behind ordinary behaviour, the non-verbal signals that arrive before any words.

Activity 1.1 — The Social Impostor: Experiencing Hidden Emotional Struggles

Facilitated by	Lithuanian participant team — YOUTH Work Matters training course
Duration	60–75 minutes
Target group	Youth workers, youth leaders, facilitators — groups of 12–25
Materials	Situation cards (4 scenarios), emotional role cards, tape to attach cards to backs



Participants in small-group work during the Social Impostor activity. The hidden role card — taped to the participant's back — reads: *SUFFER FROM DEPRESSION*.

□ Aim

To help youth workers experientially understand how hidden emotional struggles affect group participation, communication and decision-making — and to develop empathy, awareness and supportive communication skills grounded in real youth work dynamics.

□ Step-by-Step Facilitation Process

Part 1 — Energiser: Eye Contact Connection (10 minutes)

1. Ask all participants to stand in a circle with their eyes closed.
2. Count to three aloud. On 'three', everyone opens their eyes simultaneously.
3. Each participant immediately looks at one specific person in the circle.
4. If two participants have made direct eye contact with each other, both step out — they have 'connected'. The game continues until only a few remain.

Briefly debrief: What made you choose who to look at? What was it like to connect without words?

Part 2 — The Roleplay (30 minutes)

1. Divide participants into four groups. Give each group a situation card:
 - Group 1: Planning a family vacation together.
 - Group 2: A friend group planning a night out in the city.
 - Group 3: Classmates preparing a group presentation together.
 - Group 4: Friends travelling to a concert when their car tyre explodes.
2. Tape a hidden emotional role card to the back of one participant in each group. They cannot see their own card; everyone else can.

Hidden emotional roles:

- Group 1 — Eating disorder
- Group 2 — Financial problems
- Group 3 — Depression

- Group 4 — Emotional dysregulation
- 3. Additionally, secretly instruct one other participant in each group to disagree with group decisions — consistently, without explanation.
- 4. Groups work through their situation for 15 minutes. Stop all groups simultaneously.

Part 3 — Reflection (25 minutes)

1. Ask the participant with the hidden role to guess what their card said.
2. Reveal the cards. Allow reactions.
3. Reveal the hidden dissenters. Allow reactions.
4. Move into the structured reflection questions.

□ Reflection Questions

- What emotion or hidden struggle do you think was attached to your back — and what made you think that?
- How did you feel during the activity, both if you had the hidden role and if you did not?
- How did the person who had to disagree feel — and how did the group feel toward them?
- Where do you see this pattern in real youth work or in the lives of young people you work with?
- What would supportive communication look like in each of these scenarios?

□ Learning Outcomes

- Experiential understanding of how hidden emotional struggles affect group dynamics.
- Development of empathy and perspective-taking skills.
- Awareness of how assumptions and behaviour patterns can create invisible exclusion.
- Understanding that dysregulation in a group member is often a signal of need, not disruption.

□ Transfer to Youth Work

This activity mirrors situations youth workers encounter regularly: the young person who seems disengaged but is carrying financial stress, the participant who disagrees with everything because they feel unseen. After facilitating, return to your context with this question: What hidden roles might the young people in my groups be carrying?

□ Emotional Safety Considerations

- The hidden roles include sensitive topics. Ensure the group already has baseline trust — this activity is not suitable for Day 1 of a programme.
- Do not assign roles in a way that mirrors a participant's known personal experience.
- After the debrief, check in with the room: 'Is there anything that came up that you need to name before we move on?'

Activity 1.2 — Emotional Baseline: The Four Quadrants

Facilitated by	Lead trainer — YOUTh Work Matters training course
Duration	45–60 minutes
Target group	Youth workers, facilitators — groups of any size
Materials	A4 sheets divided into four quadrants, pens

□ Aim

To increase self-awareness of personal emotional patterns and identify which emotions dominate, are avoided, drain energy, or provide energy in youth work contexts.

□ Step-by-Step Facilitation Process

1. Distribute a sheet divided into four quadrants: What emotion appears most in my work? / What emotion do I avoid? / What emotion drains me? / What emotion gives me energy?
2. Give 10 minutes of completely silent individual writing. Do not explain what to write — trust the questions.
3. Form groups of three. Each person shares one observation — not everything, just what they are willing to name.
4. Return to the full group. Ask: what surprised people? What was common across groups?

□ Reflection Questions

- Which quadrant was easiest to fill in — and which was hardest?
- What does the emotion you avoid tell you about your limits?
- How does your emotional baseline affect the young people you work with?

□ Learning Outcomes

- Increased personal emotional vocabulary and self-awareness.
- Identification of patterns in emotional experience that are usually unconscious.
- Foundation for exploring self-regulation (Chapter 2) and relational dynamics (Chapter 3).

□ Emotional Safety Considerations

- Some participants may be surprised by what surfaces during silent writing. Normalise this: 'If something unexpected came up, that means awareness is working.'
- Never ask anyone to share their full quadrant map with the group. Only self-selected sharing.

CHAPTER 2 — REGULATION

Emotional regulation, grounding, embodied methods

Understanding emotion is not enough. Emotional intelligence in youth work requires the capacity to stay regulated under pressure — to remain present, grounded and responsive when the room becomes tense, when a young person escalates, when conflict erupts, or when your own emotional history is triggered by what is happening in front of you.

The activities in this chapter work with the body as the primary site of regulation. They are not relaxation exercises. They are professional tools — methods for developing the physiological and relational capacity to stay within the window of tolerance during emotionally demanding work.

Activity 2.1 — Body Connection & Grounding

Facilitated by	Italian participant team — YOUth Work Matters training course
Duration	45 minutes

Target group	Youth workers, youth leaders, young people aged 16+ — groups of 8–20
Materials	Comfortable floor space — movement-friendly clothing recommended

□ Aim

To reconnect participants with bodily awareness as the foundation of emotional regulation. To develop sensitivity to physical signals of stress, activation and calm, and to practise non-verbal attunement through embodied contact.

□ Step-by-Step Facilitation Process

Phase 1 — Body Awakening (10 minutes)

1. Begin with self-massage: participants shake out hands, gently tap arms, shoulders, head and legs.
2. Move into a shared massage in a circle: everyone faces the same direction and gently massages the shoulders of the person in front. After 2 minutes, reverse direction.

Prompt: 'Notice how you feel right now — what part of your body is most present to you?'

Phase 2 — Paired Body Awareness (15 minutes)

3. In pairs, one person draws attention to a specific area of the partner's body with gentle conscious pressure. The receiving partner simply notices. Switch roles.
4. Second exercise — Leading and Following: one partner leads movement through space; the other follows, mirroring direction and speed. Connection through eye contact, not touch. Switch leader on a signal. Repeat two or three times.

Phase 3 — Body Contact and Trust (15 minutes)

5. Pairs move through a continuous sequence: standing → hands touching → guiding each other to all-fours → back to standing. Slow, consensual, continuous. No instruction beyond 'stay connected, stay present'.

Phase 4 — Closing (5 minutes)

6. Standing position, eyes closed. Facilitator: 'Feel your feet on the floor. Notice three points of contact between your body and the ground. Notice your breath — not changing it, just noticing.'

□ Reflection Questions

- What do you notice in your body right now compared to when we began?
- Which phase felt most comfortable — and which felt slightly uncomfortable? What does that tell you?
- Where do you carry tension in everyday youth work — and what might that tension be telling you?
- How could bodily awareness be useful in the middle of a difficult situation with a young person?

□ Emotional Safety Considerations

- Body contact activities require explicit consent. State clearly at the start: 'Everything here is voluntary. If at any point you want to step back, please do so without explanation.'
- Watch for signs of freeze or shutdown (sudden stillness, withdrawal). If you notice this, quietly check in with that person.
- This activity should not be facilitated on Day 1. Psychological safety must already be established.

Activity 2.2 — Improv Theatre Games: Spontaneity, Presence & Regulation

Facilitated by	Polish participant team — YOUth Work Matters training course
Duration	60–90 minutes (can be run in shorter blocks)
Target group	Youth workers, young people aged 14+ — groups of 8–25
Materials	An open space with room to move; no materials required



Participants during the Improv Theatre session — spontaneity, co-creation, and presence in action.

□ Aim

To develop present-moment awareness, spontaneity, and the capacity to stay regulated and responsive under the mild productive pressure of improvisation. To practise co-creation, active listening, and collaborative storytelling in a low-stakes, playful environment.

□ Step-by-Step Facilitation Process

Select two or three games based on your group's energy. The order below moves from easier to more demanding.

Game 1 — Group Scene (15–20 minutes)

1. Up to 8 participants enter the space. Facilitator names a shared situation: a waiting room, a group therapy session, a bus journey, a job interview.
2. The group improvises together — each person finding their character and contribution. No script, no right answer, no failure.
3. After 5–7 minutes, pause. Debrief briefly: What did you notice? Who shaped the atmosphere?

Game 2 — Change! (10–15 minutes)

- Two or three participants improvise a scene. At random intervals, facilitator calls 'CHANGE!' — the last speaker must immediately change their most recent line.
- The facilitator can also target a specific person: 'Matt — change your position.'

Game 3 — Clown Exercise (20–25 minutes)

- Two volunteers leave the room. The group secretly decides three things for them to do when they return.
- When they return, they have no information. They experiment. The group applauds when they get closer to a task (hot) and goes silent when they move away (cold).

Advanced version: Replace clapping with natural group responses. Participants must feel the room rather than rely on a signal.

Game 4 — The Conductor (15 minutes)

- Five to seven participants stand in a line. The group suggests a story title. The facilitator (conductor) points at one person at a time — while pointed at, they speak; when the pointer withdraws, they stop mid-word.
- The next person continues the story from exactly that point. The conductor manages rhythm and signals the approaching end.

Game 5 — Only Questions (15 minutes)

- Two queues. The two at the front improvise a scene using only questions. If someone says a statement, they go to the back of the queue and the next person steps forward.

☐ Reflection Questions

- What happened in your body when you didn't know what was coming next?
- When did you feel most present — and when did you go on 'autopilot'?
- How is the capacity to respond spontaneously connected to emotional regulation?
- Where in your youth work do you feel most 'in the scene' — and where do you feel most scripted?

☐ Learning Outcomes

- Development of present-moment awareness and the ability to stay focused under mild pressure.
- Experience of co-regulation in a collective, playful context.
- Insight into personal patterns of control, avoidance or over-functioning in group settings.

☐ Transfer to Youth Work

Improv games require no materials, no language barrier, and they work across a wide age range. They are particularly effective for groups that are intellectually resistant to 'emotional' topics — improv approaches the same competences through play. Consider beginning your next facilitation session with 5 minutes of an improv game before introducing any content. Notice what shifts.

☐ Emotional Safety Considerations

- Improv creates mild, productive pressure — not distress. If a participant becomes genuinely overwhelmed, acknowledge it lightly and move on.
- Make it explicit at the start: 'In improv, there are no wrong answers and no failure. The only rule is to stay present.'

CHAPTER 3 — POWER & RELATIONAL DYNAMICS

Leadership, roles, group climate and collective storytelling

Regulation is personal. But youth work is relational. The third chapter moves from the individual body and emotional state into the dynamics between people — the visible and invisible structures of power in groups, the roles we unconsciously take under stress, the climate we create through our repeated choices as facilitators, and the stories we build together when we trust each other enough to share authorship.

Activity 3.1 — Exploring Leadership Models: Powerful and Powerless

Facilitated by	Spanish participant team (INVEP) — YOUTh Work Matters training course
Duration	60–75 minutes
Target group	Youth workers, youth leaders, volunteers — groups of 12–30
Materials	Various everyday objects (scissors, cups, markers, tape — same set per group); large paper; markers



Objects created by participants as visual representations of their leadership models during the Powerful and Powerless activity.

"We need a new vision, a new definition of power and leadership. We must go away from the old model and toward one of creative cooperation on our small and threatened planet — toward a sane and sustainable culture, a culture of soul, a culture that values life more than war, people more than profits, and hope more than despair."

— Johnnetta Cole, pioneering Afro-American anthropologist and educator

□ Aim

To explore and critically reflect on different leadership models — from dominance-based to care-based, from hierarchical to collaborative — using an intersectional and ecofeminist lens. To help participants recognise how power operates in everyday youth work and begin imagining more equitable, relationship-based approaches.

□ Step-by-Step Facilitation Process

Part 1 — Opening Plenary (15 minutes)

1. Pose two questions — do not answer them. Collect responses on a large visible sheet:
 - What is leadership?
 - What characteristics does a leader have?

Do not offer definitions at this stage. Let the group's own understanding emerge. Observe who speaks, who is silent, who challenges.

Part 2 — Group Work (25 minutes)

2. Divide participants into four groups. Each group receives the same set of everyday objects.
3. Instruction: 'Using these objects, create a visual representation of your leadership model. You have 20 minutes.'
4. No further instruction. Observe the process: who decides, who delegates, who is excluded, how consensus is reached.

Part 3 — Cross-Observation (25 minutes)

5. Each group presents their creation to the others — without speaking.
6. The other groups respond: Who is leading in this model and how? How is power distributed? What does this model assume about people?

Part 4 — Plenary Discussion & Closing (15 minutes)

7. Facilitate a structured discussion using the reflection questions below.
8. Close by introducing the concept of feminist leadership for transformation — care-based, interdependent, redistributing power.

□ Reflection Questions

- How do we recognise power in our everyday lives — including in youth work spaces?
- What objects did your group choose to represent power — and why those objects?
- What would need to change in your organisation for leadership to become more care-based and collaborative?
- Is it possible to imagine a form of power that is not based on domination — of people, of nature, of difference?

□ Learning Outcomes

- Critical awareness of how power and leadership are constructed and distributed in groups.
- Exposure to care-based and ecofeminist models of leadership.
- Reflection on personal leadership style and its impact on group climate and inclusion.

□ Facilitation Tips

- The silent cross-observation phase is powerful — protect it. Do not allow groups to explain their creations during this phase.



- Ensure all voices are heard during the plenary. If the same two or three people are speaking, invite others explicitly.

□ Emotional Safety Considerations

- Discussions about power can trigger personal experiences of marginalisation or privilege. Hold the space with care.
- Avoid directing the conversation toward individual blame. The focus is on structural patterns and collective responsibility.

Activity 3.2 — Storybonding: Collective Storytelling as Connection

Facilitated by	Romanian participant team (Asociatia AIDE) — YOUth Work Matters training course
Duration	40–50 minutes
Target group	Youth workers, young people — groups of 8–20
Materials	One A4 sheet per story; pens for each participant

Participants during the collective storytelling circle — building one shared narrative together, sentence by sentence.

□ Aim

To build connection, creativity and collective trust through shared storytelling. Storybonding invites a group to create one story together — each person contributing one sentence — producing a shared narrative that belongs to everyone and to no one alone.

□ Step-by-Step Facilitation Process

1. Ask participants to sit in a circle.
2. Explain: 'We are going to create one story together. Each person writes one sentence, then passes the paper to the next person. There is no wrong direction for the story to take.'
3. Begin with one sentence — for example: 'It was an ordinary Tuesday morning when everything changed.'
4. Optional blind variant: participants fold the paper after their sentence so only their sentence is visible before passing. This increases surprise and creativity.
5. Continue until the paper has gone around the full circle.
6. One participant volunteers to read the complete story aloud to the group.
7. Move into the reflection questions.

For groups of more than 16: split into two groups, each creating their own story simultaneously, then both read aloud.

□ Reflection Questions

- Which part of the story did you feel most connected to — and why?
- What surprised you about where the story went?
- What does it feel like to contribute something and then let go of control over what happens next?
- What does this experience tell you about individual voice and group creation?

□ Learning Outcomes

- Experience of co-creation and shared authorship in a low-pressure, playful context.
- Emotional connection through the shared act of making something together.
- Reflection on individual contribution, collective trust, and the dynamics of collaborative process.

□ Transfer to Youth Work

Storybonding works particularly well around Day 4 or 5 of a longer programme — when participants know each other but have not yet fully opened up. The shared story creates a group memory: something we made together that belongs to all of us. It can also be adapted as a closing ritual, as a team-building tool, or as a creative writing exercise with young people exploring themes of identity, future, or belonging.

□ Emotional Safety Considerations

- This is a low-intensity activity. However, if the story takes a dark or uncomfortable turn, note it in the debrief: 'The story went somewhere unexpected. What does that tell us about what is alive in this group right now?'

Closing Reflections: Adapting These Activities

No activity in this toolkit will land the same way twice. A session that produced profound reflection in one group may feel flat in another. What it asks of you, as a facilitator, is constant attentiveness — reading the room, noticing the energy, adjusting the pace, and being willing to stop, adapt, or close an activity early without apology.

Group composition	Age, cultural background, language capacity, and history with emotional topics all influence how an activity lands. Adapt scenarios and reflection questions accordingly.
Programme phase	Body contact activities and roleplay with sensitive content should not be facilitated on Day 1. Build psychological safety first.
Time available	Every activity can be shortened or lengthened. Shorten by reducing the number of games, or skipping one quadrant. Lengthen by adding a second round or extending reflection time.
Language	Most activities can be facilitated without extensive verbal instruction. Body Connection, Improv and Storybonding work across language barriers. The Social Impostor requires clear translated scenario cards.
Setting	All activities have been tested in indoor training settings. Body Connection can be moved outdoors. Improv works in any open space. Storybonding works anywhere participants can sit in a circle.

This toolkit did not begin as a document. It began as a group of people doing difficult, meaningful work together. The activities here carry the fingerprints of every facilitator and participant who shaped them — through the moments that worked, the moments that didn't, the adjustments made in real time, and the reflections that followed.

If you use these activities and adapt them, you are continuing that process. You are adding your own group's experience to the collective knowledge this toolkit represents.

That is what co-creation means.

For more information about the YOUTH Work Matters training course or the Erasmus+ programme:

Coordinating organisation	Asociatia AIDE — Romania
Training course	YOUTH Work Matters – Emotional Intelligence & Wellbeing in Youth Work
Programme	Erasmus+ — Youth
Partners	MDK2 Piekary (Poland), INVEP (Spain), Associazione Spazio Etneo (Italy), Viešoji Įstaiga Telšių Jaunimo Centras (Lithuania)